

# OUR UNCLE HO

## His Native Village and Childhood

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### NGHE AN PROVINCE AND ITS LANDSCAPE

THE song of yore kept ringing in our ears on our way to Uncle's native village. But now the landscape includes not only green mountains and blue water. In this scenery, still with green mountains and blue water, we were enraptured by the soft green ricefields, the new and graceful iron bridges, the bright red roofs of schools and dwelling-houses by the hedges of young bamboo-trees and the factories which have sprung up from our land as if in a wonderful dream.

From Vinh we took the provincial road to Do Luong. At kilometre 14 we walked about one kilometre to the left and arrived at his paternal village named Kim Lien or Son. About two kilometres to the south of Sen village is his maternal village named Chua. Both these villages lie between the Lam river and the provincial road.

We were on the land of the greatest patriots and the most famous revolutionaries of Viet Nam: Mai Huc De (1), Phan Dinh Phung, Phan Boi Chau (2), Tran Phu (3). Land of heroes but also land of poets, among whom was Nguyen

Du (4), author of the well-known *Kim Van Kieu* ballad.

In the most dramatic hours of our history, these provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh were more than once the last bastion against the enemy. In 1418, when King Le Loi (5) rose against the Chinese feudalists' invasion army, Nghe An was his rear. That land had fed his resistance force for years before they succeeded in liberating the whole country. Over three centuries later, in 1783, when the Qing (a Chinese dynasty) invaded Viet Nam, it was in Nghe An and Thanh Hoa its neighbour, that Nguyen Hue (6) recruited an army 50,000 strong with which he crushed the invaders and retok Hanoi capital.

Later, under French rule, this region was the centre of activity of all anti-French movements — from the Van Than (7) movement to the Dong Dai (8) movement and the Nghe Tinh Soviet (9) uprising. It was on the road between Vinh and Uncle's village that 217 fighters in the insurrection died on September 12, 1930. In Nghe An province there are more mountains and forests than ricefields. The soil is arid and poor. In summer, the blazing sun and hot wind, blowing from the South-West, dry up land, plants and grass

and harass the people. Added to these are heavy rainfalls and violent storms which have been known to change even the course of rivers.

The Mees in the Nghe An mountain region relate that once Heaven got angry and blew thousands of people and even mountains to other places. The history of Viet Nam also recorded many big storms and floods such as the storm in 1437 which shook the earth and made the water of the Lam river as red as blood.

However, ferocious nature can be tamed, provided that man strives and struggles. The inhabitants of Nghe An have struggled without cease.

These qualities — firmness, perseverance, industriousness and thrift — have been tempered in the historic conditions peculiar to Nghe An.

The long-term struggle against nature and foreign aggressors has created a tradition of enduring hardship and solidarity in fighting, and a rich cultural life full of local colour. Besides the tradition of industriousness and studiousness of the scholars there is a treasury of priceless folk literature with legends, folk-tales, traditional operas, songs, folk-songs and lullabies, and our great

poets and writers, such as Nguyen Du and Phan Boi Chau, who went to parties of weavers' songs.

It was in that framework that the future President of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam grew up. Life was hard — too little land in proportion of the number of people — in his village where the average per capita landholding was about 1,000 sq.m. Moreover, almost all the land was in the hands of a few rich families. Some — at the time of Uncle's childhood — owned as many as 500,000 sq.m. and 120 buffaloes and oxen. The majority of the villagers worked on hired land. They were always in rags — more often in loin-cloth than in trousers, hence Sen Village was also called Loin-cloth village. Despite this sad plight, the toiling life was without its merry moments. The villagers have always been very fond of singing. During our visit to Uncle's village we heard a woman lull her baby:

*Sleep soundly, darling!*

*The water is not yet carried (to) and I'm still tilling you.*

The landscape of this region is very fine indeed. The day we stood on Chung mountain, on our left the Lam river meandering at the foot of the Thien Nhan mountain looked like a snow-white winding ribbon in the sunlight, to our right is the Tac mountain range linked with the far away Dai Hue mountain range. Before us, between mountain ranges is Uncle's house with the ricefields of his village. Down in the ricefields we saw all shades of green: the yellow-green of sugar cane fields, the refreshing green of autumn rice-plants, the dark green of bamboo-free groves, here and there some green fir-trees and many other shades of green. Village succeeds village and ricefield succeeds ricefield.

The love for one's native place is the germ of the love for one's country.

This region also produced Hoang Xuan Hanh who was the uncle of Uncle's mother. Hanh once went to the North to join De Than (11) in the fighting against the French. Later he returned to Nghe An to fight the French at Ho Lu (Thanh Chuong district). He was in the end captured by the enemy and sent in

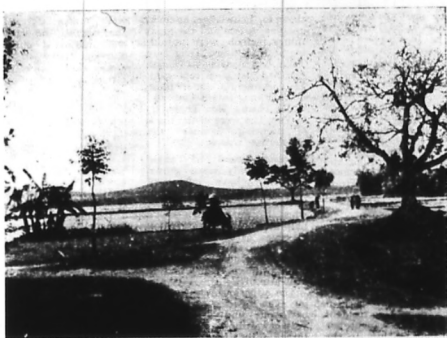
exile to Poulo Condore Island. It was related that when he was taken to the office of the head of Nghe An province and about to be put to torture, Hanh put his tongue between his teeth and had it cut off. The enemy was struck with amazement and realized that torture would be of no use to him. On his return from Poulo Condore, Hanh stayed at Hue with Phan Boi Chau to attend to and also to protect his old friend until the latter's death.

### HIS GENEALOGY

UNCLE's father was second laureate of the competitive examination for the doctorate degree, but was not of aristocratic lineage. Uncle belongs to the branch of Nguyen Sinh. In the Le dynasty (12), some members of this branch graduated at various royal examinations, but in the Nguyen dynasty nobody graduated, except his father. His family had very little land. Nearly all his relatives had to work at farm-hands and only since the August 1945 Revolution have they known less hardships.

How did there happen to be a second graduate of the doctorate degree in the Nguyen Sinh branch? Uncle's father, Nguyen Sinh Sac, was born into a peasant family and was the son of a concubine. His parents died when he was still a boy and he had to live with his elder half-brother. He was treated like a servant. It is related that on one occasion, not finding the vegetables he had prepared to her liking, his sister-in-law hurled the whole pot at his head. He suffered very much and thought of a way out. In those days, the only way out was study. If he studied well his sufferings might come to an end. In his village, scholar Hoang Xuan An, a native of Chua village, held a class. The boy tried to learn from him. He studied while minding buffaloes. He studied very hard, learning his lessons even when sitting on the back of his buffalo or pounding rice.

Shortly after, scholar An returned to Chua village. He asked the cruel elder brother



President HO CHI MINH's native land, which he left still in his teens.



hand, and there he was often teased by buffalo-boys. However, Thanh proceeded in silence. His mind was occupied by more important things. Phan Boi Chau relates that at that time little Thanh loved two verses made by Tuy Vien that he himself used to recite:

*Everyday do not forget that all your deeds are recorded in history books.*

*The meant way to rise up is through literature.*

He was really a wonder to be able to appreciate these verses at an early age. Literature here means official career through literary examinations at that time. The doctor himself was fed up with these competitions. He spent most of his time to teaching. After graduation he was reluctant to take up his office but his family being in want, he had to teach to keep up his children. He used to say to his students, "What is the use of literary examinations?" Actually he attended very little to his children's studies. The little time he stayed at home, he used to compose maxims and write them on the wall to teach his children. His teaching was not methodical, however. When old Chau reminded him of his children's education he sent little Thanh to a class held by Hoang Phan (Quynh), a licentiate who was well known as a teacher. Little Thanh also studied with some other teachers. But Thanh did not study for examination purposes. He was very fond of reading, not classical books but the Chinese novels *Three Kingdoms* and *Go West*. He paid little attention to doing exercises but very often asked the meaning of words.

Thanh's intelligence was by no means developing rapidly. It was obvious that the thoughtful and active boy who craved for knowledge did not confine himself to ready-made rules and though very gentle by nature he was also very intelligent.

At that time Thanh read much and also played much. He was fond of playing chess, and climbing the Chung mountain where there were many places good for playing. There were times when he wandered by himself in front of the Commune shrine.

Thanh's shrine. From there he could get a very fine view all around. There were also times when he went with some friends as far as Ru Mau, Doc Loi temple and even Ru Thanh, many dozens of kilometres from his village.

In his studies as well as in his playing, Thanh always was an initiative. As he was growing up there were other things besides studying and playing. In the five-room house built by the villagers, the two brothers occupied the fifth room next to the kitchen. In this room there was a wooden bed by the window. On hot days, a hammock was hung in the room. From the window one could see the far away Ru Chung. Quite near, on the left was Dien's forge which resounded with hammering all day long. On the right was the Coc well. In the old days the insurgents of Chu village threw their broad-bladed swords in this well

when the enemy arrived, and fished them out after his departure. Nearer, right in the garden were a few tomb among the lemon and shadow trees.

What occupied his mind then was the corvee forced upon the people by the French to build the Cao Rao highway which was intended for the "pacification" of the country and Laos and the exploitation of our natural resources. For the inhabitants of Chau and Sca villages as well as for those of the whole province of Nghe An this was a great calamity. Even from the age of 10 to 50 had to go on corvee. Cao Rao was situated upstream of the Lam river near the Vietnamese-Lao border, two hundred and four kilometres from Vinh. Cao Rao was then known as an unhealthy area. Actually this was not due to the climate but to the prevailing harsh colonial regime. The workers were ill-fed, ill-clothed and lacked medical care. At night they slept on the roadsides in the bushes. Savage beatings by French supervisors were of common occurrence. Thus many people met their death there and those who could return to their villages were bags-of-bones and disease-ridden. Added to that, superstition, tales about mountain ghosts and water monsters, and prejudices against the highlanders frightened the wretched workers all the more. People recommended each other:

*Those who go to Cao Rao Should not forget to bring with them mats to roll and unroll.*

To enroll the mat to lie on at night in the bushes. To roll it was to use it as a shroud for burial. The day of departure from one's village was to be remembered by one's family as the day of one's death. As groups of people in rags left their homes, painful hymned proses were heard:

*The Hong mountain is still high. The Great Sea is usually full.*

*The King of Annam has surrendered to the French Making the people very wretched.*

or *This time there will be great misery; Never has one seen such King and mandarins. The villagers left carrying their luggage*

*While the whole village said prayers to the high sky. Pray to the deities in Polesia and Southern Cross. Don't let people in the plain to go to work in the mountains.*

There were people who refused to go on corvee and fled from their villages. Those living near the jungle took shelter in it. The enemy knew that the refugees would return home at night, so he often raided their houses at night to round them up. During these nights, villages



*The house where President Ho Chi Minh lived in his childhood. Changing hands many times later, it was recently bought back and rebuilt on its initial site.*

were assailed by gong and drumbeats, moving lamps and torches, then weeping and dogs' barking. These painful sights were witnessed so many times and not only in Nghe An province. During that time, poet Nguyen Khuyen (5) cried in pain for the plight of those who had to go on corvee at Yen Bai:

*Over a thousand miles of green forests and red mountains, Many thousands of people toiled in unhealthy areas.*

The song *A Te A* (Asia) has some verses:

*I hear also of Lao Cai, Yen Bai,*

*So many thousands of people cutting mountains and dredging rivers.*

*How unhealthy these lands of mountains and jungle.*

*Corpses were thrown into deep waters and bones heaped up in remote caves.*

Under French rule, corvee was a tragedy that occurred all over the country at that time and for many dozens years to come.

The doctor being a mandarin, his family was exempt from corvee. But he was very grieved by the sad plight of the villagers. He sold the few ricefields left him by his parents to give some money to each of his villagers who had to go on corvee at Cao Rao. This was really queer from a mandarin. Had he not himself gone through days of wretchedness never could he have done such generous deeds.

This was a second shock for Thanh. The pain that grieved him this time was more serious compared with his mother's death. From the sad plight of corvee he deduced other miseries that daily took place around him. Taxes were increasing and the people lived in utter poverty. No need to search far; Mr. Phung's family in his hamlet could never eat their fill all the year round. His mind went back to the pompous life at Hue, the spring trips in great state by the King and the Nam Gio (to ceremonies. Something had certainly to be done to lead

his relatives and villagers, out of this hellish existence.

In reality he was at a loss as to what to do. By then all the uprisings of the Van Thanh movement had failed. In his Tubb, the insurgent troops under Phan Dinh Phung had disintegrated long ago. In Nghe An, Phan Boi Chau's plan to storm the chief town in surprise on the occasion of the enemy's national day (July 14, 1901) was stillborn. In the North, the insurgent troops under Hoang Hoa Tham had made a truce with the enemy. In the mind of the educated people at that time there was a struggle between the stubborn conservative tendency opposing all renovations and the eager tendency of learning from the West. The situation was rather complicated because the conservative group was composed of two categories: one was xenophobic and the other meant to secure honours and wealth through the old fashioned way of study. The new group also included two categories: one intending to learn to fight the French but the other learned French with a view to having:

*Champagne at night and in the morning one's milk, as was said by the satirist. Tu Xung.*

Besides not easily occurred in this complicated situation. But the old doctor was fed up with the old education. He sent his sons to the Quoc Hoc school and himself, though over fifty years of old, still painstakingly learned French. Young Thanh shared his father's view. The future path was still hazy but he clearly realized that the French had to be driven out at all costs; modern education was necessary and conservative attitudes to be done away with.

By that time Phan Boi Chau had graduated as first tutor at the 1901 royal examination and was well-known throughout the country. He was working intensely for the revolution. After the failure of the surprise attack on Nghe An, he went to the North to see De Tham. Under pretext of carrying on his

studies at Giam school he went to Hue to rally the scholars. He chose Prince Cuong De (17), making him leader of the movement then went over to the South and the Centre looking for talented men. In May 1904, he held a meeting with his comrades in Quang Nam to set up a society, later called the Hoi Dai Tan (Great United Front). The society would carry out activities in the country and at the same time send people abroad to study and seek foreign aid. In February 1903 Phan Boi Chau left for Japan and met Liang Chi Chao and some Japanese statesmen, then returned to his home country early in July of the same year intending to send Cuong De abroad and looking for outstanding youths to send to study in Japan. The doctor's two sons were among the youths who held his attention. But under the pretext that their father was absent, they said they could not leave without his agreement. The real reason was that they did not want to go.

Why did they not want to go? Phan Boi Chau used to call on the doctor. Young Thanh often listened to their talks. Phan Boi Chau had long been a great admirer of their power over his listeners. Even now, after half a century, his poems still show the great warmth of his patriotism and heroism to which even petty souls could not remain insensible. Then why was our youth not charmed? The age of fifteen is the age of hot blood and he was fond of travelling, while he had refused? Actually he was not without admiration for Mr. Phan. The reason was that he was a youth of heart but also of head, and his opinion was not completely like Mr. Phan's. He felt, though not very clearly, something about the French policy of reliance on the powerful mandarins to kindle the fire of the royalist movement, of advancing a prince as the standard bearer of the uprising and chiefly of reliance on the mandarins to be trusted study in Japan.

Shortly after Mr. Phan's departure for Japan, young Thanh went to Hue to join

his father. An incident occurred before he left.

Hearing of the Dong Ha movement, the head of Nghe An province, Ton That Han, summoned all the scholars in his province to his presence. As the doctor was absent, Ton That Han wanted to jail the mayor of the doctor's village. Revolted by this glaring injustice, young Thanh went in a hurry to Vinh asking the province head to jail him in place of the mayor, Ton That Han had to cancel his order.

#### AGAIN IN HUE

N Hue Thanh studied at the Quoc Hoc school. It was housed in the former barracks of the royal marines, with big iron-wound pillars. The gate was crowned with a bell-tower. The school, in addition, to four primary classes and two senior primary classes had one special class for post-graduation. The curriculum included a little of natural sciences, of history and geography but the main subject was translation from French into Vietnamese and vice versa. At the beginning, the head-master was Nordemann who was at the same time a raft trader. He was married to a Vietnamese woman and spoke Vietnamese and was known under the Vietnamese name as Ngo De Man. After him came a certain Logiou who had been in the French Foreign Legion. While De Man was still fighting the French, sometimes his troops captured French soldiers and took them to the Resistance base. In the then conditions the prisoners led the same life as their victors. People throughout the country rejoiced at the news that spread very rapidly that French soldiers were forced to go barefooted, to carry water and to pound rice. Logiou has been one of these prisoners and the colonial administration rewarded him by making him headmaster. Such were the personalities at the Quoc Hoc school who on behalf of France were "civilizing the Annamese" at that time.

The aspect of Hue city was gradually changing. Besides the Trang Tien bridge, another bridge — the Bach Ho bridge — laid across the Perfume river was under construction. In 1907, the railway-line to Tourane was built and the following year the railway-line to Dong Ha. The French were growing in number, led a more luxurious life and became more arrogant while the people were

living in greater poverty. Salt tax, which was 0.25 piastre for 100 kilograms in 1906, rose to 2.25 piastres in 1906. The increase of poll tax, land tax and all other taxes broke countless families.

Since the day the French sent their envoys to our country,

Owing to the copper and silver you and I (19) must be parted.

Well aware of the people's hatred, the enemy was always afraid of surprise attack. In 1907, after forcing King Thanh Thai to abdicate in favour of his son, the enemy issued an order that anyone who went in the streets at night had to carry a lamp, lest he be arrested. When going out it caused much trouble to have one's lamp. There was then a song:

To go out one must carry a lamp.

The wind blows it out and the wick is like the more wretched.

Meanwhile the traitorous mandarins were laying bare their mean and foul nature.

The people's patriotism, however, was still seething. From Phan Phan Bai Chau kept sending to the home country literary works calling on the people to fight the French. After his return home from Japan in 1906, Phan Chu Trinh (20) sent a letter to the French government demanding reforms. His severe accusation of the mandarins: "For them the country is like a big market and the people are fish and meat..." Their beggary habits had made them shameless," had a great repercussion among the people.

Immediately after, the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc was set up in Hanoi and was warmly welcomed by the people (1907):

The lectures are as crowded as festivals,

To the literary debates, people come like rain.

A wave of new thought spread over the whole country, piercing the thick darkness piece by piece. After the banning of the Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc, another movement — the Modernization movement — was launched. Men were urged to cut their hair short, to wear short coats, to use local products, to give up bad customs, to open schools and trading companies. As it went deeper among the masses it took on a more combative character, turning into demonstrations against corvees and taxes.

The first demonstrations broke out in Quang Nam province in March 1908 and

spread very rapidly to almost all provinces of Central Viet Nam. Early in April the inhabitants of Thua Thien province enthusiastically responded to the movement. The inhabitants of six provinces streamed to Hue. At Bao Vinh, Kim Luong, An Cuu and Vi Da on the roads leading to Hue, stations were set up where the demonstrators with long hair had cut short and their long tunics shortened. The demonstrators came and lay down on the Trang Tien Bridge, all around the palace of the French Senior Resident, the Thua Pha and as far as Dap Da and along the An Cuu road. The inhabitants of other districts joined them, bringing rice, cooking pots and mats and stayed for three days and nights on end demanding a reduction of taxes. The students of Giam school mixed with them and sang rhymed prose. City folk gave tea to the demonstrators. The demonstrators called each other bosom brothers and this was a delight to the ears. The French took fright and asked King Duy Tan to talk to the demonstrators. Duy Tan rode a four horse carriage escorted by two rows of cavalry. Duy Tan was then eight years old and though nobody gave him ear, he was allowed to go through. All others' carts and horses were stopped. The French took refuge in their houses. None of them could be seen in the streets. On the fourth day they carried out outright repression. French troops from two garrisons in Hue (one behind the palace of the Senior Resident) advanced and fired at the unarmed demonstrators. A skirmish took place on the Trang Tien bridge. Driven to extremity some people jumped into the river pulling down French soldiers with them. Blood was shed all over the bridge.

In other provinces, mass murders of innocent people were also perpetrated. A well-known scholar, Tran Quy Cap, who was then head of the education service in Nha Trang was sentenced to death. Phan Chu Trinh, Huynh Thuc Khang (21), Ngo Duc Ke (22), Dang Nguyen Can (23), and others were sent in exile to Poulo Condore. Even the possession of a map of Viet Nam were put in jail. The enemy said that to have a map was to have a scheme to wreck back the country.

Then came the failure of the attempt to poison the French garrison in Hanoi (1908), the French attack on Yen The (1909), Dang Thai Han's (24) suicide in Nghe An (1910) and the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910).

Many people grew pessimistic. But, after witnessing the

unbending heroism of his compatriots and the enemy's barbarous repression, young Thanh became more thoughtful and was seething with the desire to save his country.

At that moment Thanh's father was dismissed from the office of head of district, the family was broken up and young Thanh gave up his studies, went to Phan Thiet and worked as a teacher at the Duc Thanh school.

(To be continued)

#### NOTES

1. Mai Hac De: leader of an uprising against the Chinese invaders in 722, later proclaimed King.
2. Phan Bai Chau (1867-1911): leader of the Dong Du (Go East) movement and of many other movements against the French colonialists from 1904 to 1925. He was arrested in Shanghai and lived in forced exile at Hue. He died on October 29, 1941.
3. Tran Phu: first Secretary General of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party. Arrested by the French colonialists, he was barbarously tortured and died in prison on September 6, 1931.
4. Nguyen Du (1765-1820): a great poet at the end of the 18th century, author of the master-piece in poetry, Kim Van Kieu.
5. Le Loi: leader of an uprising against the Ming invaders, after a ten-year struggle, he liberated Viet Nam and mounted the throne in 1428. He died in 1433.
6. Nguyen Huu: a national hero. He led the peasants in their struggle against various feudal rulers since 1771 and by 1786 succeeded in uniting the country. In 1796 he smashed the Ching aggression troops—200,000 strong—within five days.
7. The Van Thuan movement: a patriotic movement led by the scholars at the end of the 19th century (1885-1896).
8. The Dong Du movement (Go East) (1904-1909): a patriotic movement urging the youth to go abroad in Japan. It was led by Phan Bai Chau who advocated reliance on Japan to liberate Viet Nam from French rule. The movement was repressed by the French and Japanese.
9. The Nghe-Tinh Soviet uprising: In 1930 and 1931, under the leadership of the local branch of the Indo-Chinese Communist Party, the workers and peasants together with the people throughout the country rose against the French imperialists and the feudal Court. The movement was the strongest in the two provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh where the colonial and feudal power collapsed in many localities. A new power was set up by the people. The movement was called the Nghe-Tinh Soviet uprising. From mid-1931, under the bloody repression of the French colonialists the movement receded.

10. The water is not yet carried: the Vietnamese word "nuoc" means "water" and "country". This poem means also "I have not yet discharged my duty toward my country."

11. De Thanh or Hoang Hoa Thanh: leader of an uprising against the French colonialists in Yen The (Bac Giang province). Stated in 1887 the French colonialists were thirty years. It had a great repercussion throughout the country and caused heavy losses to the enemy. Thanh was murdered by a traitor on February 10, 1913.

12. The Le dynasty ruled Viet Nam from 1428 to 1527.

13. Tong Duy Tan: a leader of an uprising against the French colonialists. He was captured on October 5, 1892.

14. Annam: Former name of Viet Nam or former name of Central Viet Nam during French domination.

15. Nguyen Khuyen: a satirical poet at the beginning of the 20th century.

16. Nam Giao: royal ceremony held every three years to worship Heaven — said by the feudals to be the Father of the King.

17. Prince Cuong De: Born in 1882, he went to Japan in 1906. To outward appearances he was president of the "Society for the Restoration of Viet Nam" but in fact he was brought up by the Japanese authorities to serve them as a traitor. He died in Tokyo in 1951.

18. Hoi Duy Tan (Modernization) was a society set up in 1904 by Phan Bai Chau and a number of scholars. It aimed at the establishment of an independent government and the French Cuong De as President.

19. You and I refers to husband and wife.

20. Phan Chu Trinh (1822-1907): a patriot who advocated capitalist democracy of reform tendency.

21. Huynh Thuc Khang: a laureate of the competitive examination for the doctorate degree in 1904, but he refused to take office. He was arrested by the French colonialists in 1908 for his revolutionary activities. Released in 1921 he worked as a journalist. In 1946 he was Minister of Interior of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. He died in 1947.

22. Ngo Duc Ke: a laureate of the competitive examination for the doctorate degree but he refused to take office. He worked in the Modernization Movement and was arrested in 1908 by the French colonialists. Released in 1921, he worked as a journalist. He died in 1929.

23. Dang Nguyen Can: a second laureate of the competitive examination for the doctorate degree and headmaster. He joined the Modernization Movement in 1904. In 1906 he was arrested by the French colonialists. He died in 1923.

24. Dang Thai Han: an eminent personality in the Modernization Society. In 1906, encouraged by French troops, he committed suicide to avoid from falling into the enemy's hands.